

Virginia Olmstead Recalls ‘Many Wonderful Years’ as Family Gathers on 100th Birthday

By Tory Cooney

Virginia Olmstead, who many in St. Ignace will recall for her service as the city clerk for 24 years, will reach her 100th birthday August 31. She still lives by herself in the little white house near the county courthouse in St. Ignace where she was born and grew up. She enjoys working with her hands and made all of the blankets, doilies, and throw pillows in her cozy living room. Mrs. Olmstead also enjoys her independence. She only relies on people to drive her places, as she gave up her car three years ago owing to difficulties with her eyesight.

Her work with the city ended with her retirement in 1978, but today she remembers it all clearly and recounts it with humor and insight.

Mrs. Olmstead didn't initially want the job of city clerk because she didn't want to get involved in politics. But people in town and her high-school-aged son, Don, eventually persuaded her to apply. She took a scrap of paper and wrote, "Please consider me for position of city clerk," and handed it to the mayor.

"And that was it," she said. "When they told me I was appointed, it was a Thursday and I said, 'Well, I'll see you on Monday,' but they said, 'No! We need someone tomorrow!' It was payday, you see, and they couldn't send out checks without the clerk's signature."

The year was 1954 and Mrs. Olmstead went to work as the city's chief financial officer. She served for 24 years and has the distinction of being the only clerk never voted in or out of office. The role became a hired position with the 1970 charter.

"I probably never would have taken the job if I'd realized how immense the responsibilities are," she said. "And we did it all without a computer!"

She issued birth certificates and sold marriage licenses, tasks which now are performed by the county, and she single-handedly managed



Virginia Olmstead holds her great-grandson, Aidan Olmstead, surrounded by family at her 100th birthday surprise party. Pictured (not in order) are her daughter-in-law, Zoe Olmstead; her grandchildren and their spouses, Gilbert and Allison Olmstead, Timothy and Sue Olmstead, David and Mary Olmstead, and Jacquie and Casey Evans; her great-grandchildren, Andrew Olmstead, Mathew Olmstead, Sarah Olmstead, Oliver Olmstead, Ben Olmstead with fiancé Heather, and Amy Sault with husband Jesse; and her great-great grandchildren, Rachel and Wyatt. Also pictured are family friends Armand and Sara Horn with their sons, Garrett and James.

all elections and maintained all official records.

She saw her role as important to maintaining the ideas spelled out in the city charter. She repeatedly referred to the inch-thick book containing the St. Ignace fourth-class-city charter and she says she held the council accountable to it.

"If they would contradict me, I just read where I got my answers," she said. "It was the law and they respected that. They might not have always liked it, but they respected it."

Sometimes, she would copy entire pages and line them on the table in front of her before council meetings even started, knowing that they'd question her.

Mrs. Olmstead also oversaw the

transition from a strict two-party city government system, the acceptance of the 1970 charter, and even the use of voting machines. She kept one in her office to demonstrate how it worked and even brought it around to various club and association meetings, hoping to overcome the public's initial resistance.

All of the changes she oversaw during her service put Mrs. Olmstead in a good position to help others navigate them, as well. She recently received a card from Ronald W. Walker, mayor from 1969 to 1973, thanking her for all the help she gave him while he was in office.

When she couldn't help someone as clerk, but could help as a private citizen, she would.

"I just loved it, working with everybody, trying to help them," Mrs. Olmstead said.

She retired at the age of 64.

"And all the things I like to do, I did," she said. She quilted, crocheted, knit, gardened, picked berries, played cards with friends and spent time with her family — at that point, divided between St. Ignace and Seattle, Washington.

"I was free to do whatever I wanted, go wherever I wanted," she said. "When I was working, I couldn't enjoy my little grandchildren, but once I retired I was able to be with them for everything. Every event, I was there."

"She's just always been really strong, independent woman, and such a kind person," said her grand-

daughter, Jacquie Evans. "She's impacted a lot of people and, for us, she's just been a powerhouse for our family, just a great presence."

Mrs. Olmstead's husband, Ora, is deceased, as are her two sons, John Oran and Donald, and her eldest grandchild, Donald Jr. Her daughter-in-law, Zoe, lives in St. Ignace.

Mrs. Olmstead has four living grandchildren, Gilbert, Timothy, Jacquie Evans, and David; 10 great-grandchildren, Andrew, Michael, Josh, Ben, Mathew, Amy Sault, Sarah, Kristen McBride, Oliver, and Aidan, and two great-great-grandchildren, Rachel and Wyatt. Another great-great grandchild is expected to arrive in early September.

Family members live in Wash-

ington, Texas, Illinois, North Carolina, and Michigan, and most returned to St. Ignace to celebrate her 100th birthday with her August 10. They met in the basement of St. Ignatius Loyola Church, where a surprise party was held for family and friends. There was chocolate cake, vanilla ice cream, and a pink metallic "Happy Birthday" tiara for Mrs. Olmstead. She was happy to see so many family members there and spend time with them throughout the following week.

"I have a beautiful family who loves me and who I enjoy very much," Mrs. Olmstead said. "God has been very good to me and I've had many wonderful years full of blessings."